

THESE, TOO, WERE UNSHACKLED

15 DRAMATIC STORIES FROM THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION
Adapted from the "Unshackled!" Radio Scripts by

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Chapter 2

Carnival - JACK MARTIN

THEY tell me that when a boy is twelve his mind pulls him in two directions at once. One part of him wants to remain a little boy and depend on Mom and Dad. The other part stretches out toward manhood. Sometimes he gets almost pulled in two. This is normal.

But when I was twelve, things went beyond normal. My life was split in two. My mom and dad were divorced. Suddenly they were strangers to each other - and to me. And the divorce faced me with a terrible choice - a choice I couldn't make.

"No, Mom, I don't think I'd better live with you."

Across the room, the stranger who was my father spoke.

"Maybe you and I could strike out together, Jack."

I couldn't look at him. "Not you either, Dad. I can't live with either one of you. I love you both too much. I wouldn't know which one to pick."

So I went to live with my grandmother. But something had happened inside me. I wasn't a child any more. It was as though I had been catapulted right into manhood. It was premature manhood, but there I was.

Gram meant well, but she was eighty-five. I got tired of her Uncle Remus stories and the Bible, and at fourteen I pulled my first "fast one." Stuffing a cheap suitcase with clean shirts and underwear, I told Gram blithely, "Don't worry. I'm just gonna visit my sister Katherine out in Colorado for a while. I'll be back."

But Katherine never saw me. Instead, I joined a carnival called the "Silver States Show." For two years I washed dishes, did grill work, and hopped counters. Then when the full day's work was done in the show's cook shack, I dashed over to the glamorous part of my job.

This was what I lived for - doing the "bally" for the world famous glass blowers.

"Come in, come in and see the glass blowers, the glass weavers, the glass spinners."

The creaking of the carousel across the way matched the rhythm of my corny spiel. "Watch them blow, watch them weave, and watch them spin!" The laughter of a drunken woman in the crowd punctuated it. "The most interesting, the most educational and amusing show on the midway! Come in, come in and see the glass blowers . . ." Around and around, in a ceaseless circle I went, like the carnival carousel.

When I was fifteen I found that a few drinks kept me from getting tired from both jobs and made me more likeable to the rest of the carnival crew. They were a substitute family, and I longed to be needed.

Yet I hadn't lost track of my own family. Whenever the show came near their town, I looked them up, and one day I had lunch with Dad in Oklahoma City. We were like strangers, and I tried to play the part of a self-contained eighteen-year-old. I wasn't prepared for what Dad had to say to me.

"How about this winter, Jack? I've been hoping you'd stick around Oklahoma City with me."

I smoothed the sleeve of my forty-dollar jacket, seeking reassurance of my ability to handle my own life, stalling for time. "What's there to do around here?" I asked him.

"You could go back to school. I hated to see you quit school."

I wasn't having any of school, and I told him so. But the way he looked at me touched some soft spot in my heart, and I agreed to quit the show and stay with him. But I reminded him I'd been on my own for a long time. "If you start clamping down on me, Dad, it's out."

The interlude with Dad had its comic side but it ended in sad failure. There was the first night I came home drunk, and Dad tried to play the part of a fatherly father. There was something ridiculous about his parental anxiety at this late date, and I told him so. The rest of the winter, he let me lead my own life, which included a lot of drinking. When spring came, I got restless and so I put my hat on the back of my head, waved bye-bye and left.

I landed a job with another carnival. In no time I was a "stick," working regularly in front of a "flat-joint." A flat-joint is a gambling concession, and a stick is a fellow who plays and wins. A stick is just a come-on for the suckers. They'd stand around, watch us sticks rake up a pile, and then figure that they'd put their money on a sure thing.

And it was a sure thing - for the guy operating the wheel, the concession owner!

At first, it shocked me to see innocent people lose their money. Sometimes they cried, sometimes they swore. One guy shot a stick in cold blood! But after a while I just took a bigger drink and went on helping to cheat more suckers, all trying to get something for nothing.

I was on top, making extra dough in the lush wagon and the main gambling tent, when Uncle Sam got me in 1940. But he didn't keep me long. My deep resentment against life plus my hard drinking gave me an active set of ulcers, and Uncle Sam let go of me fast.

Back in civilian life, I cut loose. My easy-going disposition vanished, and I got meaner. I was so full of hate that I just wanted to be left alone to drink, so I beat it with a pal down to Juarez in Old Mexico with enough dough saved up for a two-weeks' continuous party.

During the rough end of the third week in Mexico, my brother Jim got me long distance and told me Dad had died suddenly of a heart attack.

"When'd it happen?" I was drunk and tired and sick, but this got through to me.

Jim's voice jolted me sober. "He's been buried two weeks, Jack. I've been trying to locate you all this time."

The day after I heard about Dad's death, I couldn't swallow a drink. Then, I didn't want to do anything else! I drank more than ever, and a new kind of pounding wanderlust got me.

In September, 1945, I hit the carnival trail again with a likeable fellow named Bob, who hop-scotched from one gambling concession to another with me. But Bob had another side to his life. He had a wife and baby and a little ranch. Bob's domestic life amused me, until I discovered that on his ranch he was growing a handsome crop of marijuana.

When I got on marijuana regularly, I thought I had found the answer to all my trouble. A kind of hysteria gripped me. I couldn't sit still five minutes without a cigarette of some kind or a drink, and I preferred both. Bob and I had to have those crutches. We were scared to death most of the time. After all, we might be blasted in the stomach any day by some carnival sucker sore at losing his roll!

On Labor Day, 1947, I visited my mother in Macon, Missouri.

But I was like a caged lion. I couldn't stand to be in a normal house with people who lived just like people. I had to get out.

Columbia, Missouri, was my next stop. I was due to open a big show there. But as I walked into the bus station in Macon, I felt as if some unseen force took hold of me. It was crazy. But it was stronger than anything I had ever known before. And the weirdest things started happening.

First, my bus to Columbia hadn't come in yet. It was going to be three hours late, they told me. I headed for a bar to drink away those three hours. But in the bar, Columbia and the new show suddenly faded away. I didn't give a hang whether I ever saw another carnival or not.

The next bus that rolled in was marked Chicago. So I walked up to the ticket window and said to the bleached blonde, "If it's all the same to you, give me a ticket to Chicago instead of this thing. I can get just as drunk there as I can in Columbia."

Boarding the Chicago bus, I had only half a pint with me but I figured on getting more at Hannibal, Missouri. But at Hannibal, the bar I was counting on was closed.

I knew there was one right next door to the station in Quincy and I knew we'd get there before

too long. But that bar had moved down the street nine blocks, and I only had a fifteen-minute stopover. I crawled back into the bus, shaking like a guy who's lost his last cent on the wheel. I cursed myself for not laying in two pints back in Macon, but I knew Peoria was coming up next. I knew Peoria like a book.

In Peoria, the bars were all closed. By the time we got to Chicago at 4:30 A.M., I was so hung over, I wanted to die. Nothing mattered now but getting myself in shape to go on a big one.

First, I needed to get some food in my stomach.

Ten minutes after I ate, I had such pain in my stomach I could hardly tell the druggist what I wanted. But I got the kind of tablets that always helped my ulcers, and I figured they'd be quieted down in a few minutes so I could start drinking again. But it didn't work out that way.

In that chilly Chicago dawn, I experienced one of the wildest flights from pain a man ever had. It felt like a dull knife being ripped in and out of me. I found my way to two city hospitals and they looked me over and said nothing was wrong with me.

I tried to kill the pain with liquor, but it got worse. I couldn't even find a place to stay. I groped in and out of loop hotels, but there was some kind of convention in town and all I got was "Sorry, no room."

Finally, on South Clark Street, I found a dinky room in a walk-up hotel, and all night I rolled around on that lumpy bed taking everything I could think of, trying to stop that awful pain.

The next day the pain was still with me, but I could walk, and I was afraid to stay alone. I dragged myself over to the Dearborn Station to check up on trains to Macon, Missouri. All I could think of was getting back home. But on the way I passed the corner of Harrison and State, and on the comer I saw what I thought was a pitchman selling his gadgets to a little group of fellows.

"Now gentlemen, you have seen my coin trick . . ." This kind of routine was in my blood. I stopped.

" . . . We've all had a good laugh over it," the pitchman said.

"And now I have the most wonderful gift in the world. Ready for you just for the taking."

I edged in closer. The trick was an old one, but I wanted to know what he was giving away. I put my foot up on a fender of a car, trying to look casual, and suddenly the pain in my stomach eased. It was the most comfortable position I'd found in twelve hours.

But then I realized I'd fallen into a trap. This guy was holding some kind of religious service. The talk about a wonderful gift was a religious gimmick. But I was too comfortable to move. I stood there, my foot up on the fender, and listened to the big fellow talk on.

"Something made you fellows stop here and if anyone of you has a need of any kind," the pitchman told the crowd on the comer, "just raise your hand, and I'll be happy to pray for your

need."

My need was to get over my stomach ache so I could start another drinking party. I held my coat over my right hand so nobody but the pitchman could see it. After he prayed, I was horrified to see him heading for me with a big smile on his face and his hand out.

"My name is Pete. I'm from the Pacific Garden Mission, fellow. I'm glad to see you."

With my foot still firmly planted on the fender, I grunted something that was hardly a friendly hello. But the big fellow was still all smiles. "I saw you raise your hand for prayer, and I prayed for you. Now I want to pray with you."

"Right here in public?" I had been conned by my own stupidity and the crazy bellyache.

Pete looked me squarely in the eye. "You've been drunk in public, haven't you? Well, you'll like this better." He put his hand on my sleeve and started to pray. With me. For me. Right there on the corner of Harrison and State.

As soon as I could get away, I beat it down the street. But all the way, I heard that guy shouting after me, "You're welcome at the Mission any time, fellow."

When I got to the station, they told me there were no trains to Macon until that night. The pain was still knifing me. I was sick of looking at movies to kill time and I knew better than to start drinking with my insides in the shape they were. So I figured that I'd stroll past that Mission and sneak in and find a place to sit down until train time.

When I got inside, it seemed only logical to ask for the pitchman. At first, I tried to con him about my religious state but when I was all through I couldn't be sure that he had bought my story.

"Okay, Jack," he told me. "If you say you're a Christian, I'll have to believe you. But wouldn't you like to spend a few days here at the Mission - until you feel better?"

I was no down-and-out bum and I told him so. Did he want to see my wallet?

"I don't mean for that reason, Jack. You see, it just so happens we need you pretty bad right here today. Our cook left this morning and we're stuck. You say you've had experience. Wouldn't you stay around and supervise in the kitchen, at least for a day or so? How about it?"

The craziest things had happened to me ever since I had walked into the Macon bus terminal, and this was the craziest of them all. Jack Martin, cook in a rescue mission! Even for two days? Well, maybe it would give me time to get myself back in shape. I said "yes" to Pete.

For three days, I moved around like a robot. My stomach nearly killed me. I didn't have the semblance of any religion. Yet I crawled out every morning at five, fixed all three meals for the stumblebums off the street, and attended all the services.

I went to the evening hymn sing and the noon prayer meeting and the five o'clock Bible class.

On the third day, in the Bible class, there was a brawny, athletic-looking guy at the end of the table. His name was Ockert and they said he used to be a coach. When he got up to talk, I wondered what in the name of common sense he was doing spouting off about the Bible.

But when he started to talk, I felt things begin to happen somewhere inside Jack Martin.

"Just think of that," he said. "**If ye shall ask anything in my name, I will do it.**' That's love. With a capital L. Only the biggest kind of heart full of Love could make a promise like that."

It didn't make sense. A big guy with muscles talking about love. But he was getting through to me. I couldn't tell why, any more than I knew why I'd taken the Chicago bus instead of the bus to Columbia. But I was hooked, I couldn't take my eyes away from him, and inside things went on happening.

"Your mother would promise to do anything you asked if she could, if it were in her power, but human beings are limited. '**No good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly,**' from us who love Him. Did you get that? Even a big guy like me needs to be loved. We all do."

We all need to be loved! That's what the big coach was saying, and my whole life spewed itself out in front of me - my whole ugly, nasty, mixed-up life - and I saw it for what it was, a desperate search for love. I remember how I split apart when my mother and dad divorced, and I knew that I'd never been able to put myself back together again.

But maybe there was a way. Maybe that's why things had gone haywire to land me here in a mission on Chicago's Skid Row. I looked up at Coach Ockert with a kind of pleading in my heart and heard him say, "If you don't have a friend and you need one, why not try CHRIST? What can you lose?"

I didn't have a thing to lose, except the ache in my stomach and the hold drugs and drink had on me and all the ugly mess in my past. So right then and there, I accepted JESUS CHRIST as my friend and my Saviour. I surrendered to CHRIST the embittered, ill, hate-filled, ruthless young gambler that was Jack Martin - me - and I told JESUS CHRIST that He could do anything He wanted to with the guy.

The days that followed were like miracles. I regained my health slowly. I lost my tearing yen for liquor and for drugs. And I stayed on at the Mission as a member of the staff.

There at the Pacific Garden Mission I met a girl who had also known the same transforming Love. Once a tough little blonde model, she was now a soft, gentle, womanly woman, serving the girls who walked in off Skid Row. Jo Taylor and I fell in love, married, and went together to help salvage alcoholics in New Jersey's Keswick Colony.

My split-apart self had been put back together by Him, and I could do no less than surrender it to Him for His service. GOD willing, in His strength, this is how I shall live out my life.

~ end of chapter 2 ~